



Uniting Church in Australia

Pitt Street Congregation

Conversation on Marriage Equality: Pitt Street perspectives

Responses to the UCA Assembly

Discussion Paper on Marriage

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Responses to the questions proposed by the Assembly

1. *Identify any challenges or new insights raised for members of the group by the commentary on the theological dimensions of the marriage services.*

As an overall comment members believe that setting the *Discussion Paper* in terms of the current [heterosexual] Marriage Service, and the doctrinal framework of creation, fall and redemption has restricted the discussion. Alternative biblical themes, such as covenant and commitment, exodus and liberation, and exile and homecoming are more suggestive and not bound to historical and cultural approaches to sex, gender and sexuality.

The Discussion Paper places too much emphasis on the need for confession in what should be a Service celebrating the joy of human love and commitment.

In biblical times, marriage was:

- (a) patriarchal, where women were the literal property of their husbands;
- (b) polygamous, where one man could own several women; and
- (c) heterosexual, with no knowledge of committed same-sex relationships.

Although still present in some societies and sections of some religions, the Uniting Church rejects the first two aspects of marriage as inconsistent with the Gospel. We believe it is time to also reject and move beyond the third as an exclusive parameter.

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2. *If the government were to legislate to enable same-gender couples to marry, what issues or questions would this raise for you.*

If the Parliament of Australia, or the NSW State Parliament were to legislate for marriage equality, this would be welcomed by the Pitt Street Uniting Church (PSUC). We would expect any such legislation to include a “conscience clause” for those clergy and congregations who do not support marriage equality. The PSUC would affirm a Minister-in-Placement if s/he were to conduct a Marriage Service for a same-gender [sex] couple, subject to the general provisions for any marriage such as the serious intent of the couple.

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3. *What would you see as appropriate responses by the Uniting Church?*

- *Pastorally for its members and wider community?*

For members of the PSUC, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI) people, a change in Commonwealth or State Government legislation policy to support marriage equality would be welcomed.

Many would state that it was overdue, and a justified reflection of the general principles of human rights and democratic participation by all citizens in society.

For the wider Uniting Church, we recognise that there are a diversity of views on this matter. All proposals for marriage equality presented to parliaments in Australia have included what might be summarised as a “conscience clause”. In legal terms, the proposed changes have been permissive, not mandatory.

For the wider community, attitudes towards LGBTI people in general, and marriage equality in particular, have changed significantly in recent years. It seems obvious that a strong and growing majority of Australians support marriage equality. This is particularly so for younger Australians. Many in the wider community would welcome the Uniting Church embracing marriage equality.

- ***In the church’s practices concerning Christian marriage?***

Given that the PSUC supports marriage equality, we believe that legislative change to achieve equality should be supported by the Assembly and other councils of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA). The Assembly will need to amend the Marriage Service to remove all references to sex and gender, though specific references could be used in services for particular couples.

A new policy would also need to include:

- Provisions for clergy who could not, in good conscience, perform a same-sex marriage; and
- Requirements for such clergy to make a pastoral referral to a clergy person who would be happy to perform the marriage.

- ***In relation to government and the church’s role in conducting marriages”?***

The Congregation has not specifically discussed this matter. Some members are aware of proposals to entirely separate the roles of church and government, but there has been no discussion.

- ***In any celebration or blessing of same-gender relationships?***

A 2010 General Meeting of the Congregation, which followed 15 months of wide discussion, agreed to support such blessing ceremonies whilst also support marriage equality (see Attachment B). Pastorally the Congregation would response to the aspirations of the couple, consistent with Christian values. For example, it is possible that a couple (of any sex/gender) might request a service of blessing, rather than marriage. We support the Minister-in-Placement making a pastoral judgement in these (like many other) circumstances.

LGBTI members at Pitt Street advise that the wider LGBTI communities are not seeking a legal alternative to marriage such as “civil unions”. The wider communities see any such move as diluting the society’s commitment to equality. This view is different to, perhaps, ten years ago. Pitt Street has not discussed the technical legalities of this matter.

4. Should the Uniting Church reconsider its understanding of marriage at this time. Why or why not?

The Pitt Street Congregation supports a reconsideration based on the grounds of both pastoral care and justice. This is not only a matter of responding to changes in society, though we would consider that important in a wide range of areas, but of faithfulness to the Gospel.

We believe the fundamental imperative for the change arises from:

- an understanding of the Gospel which upholds an ethic of mutual relations built on compassion, grace, and respect for the dignity and participation of all.
- the example and recorded teachings of Jesus. The Gospels record Jesus' ministry as being concerned for the poor, the outcast, and those rejected by society. The overwhelming weight of Jesus' ministry was towards inclusion rather than exclusion. As a faith community we would hope that we always lean on the side of welcoming and including rather than the opposite.
- values in the early Christian communities, exemplified by Paul when writing to the Galatians ("In Christ there is neither Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female", 3:28).
- our deep respect for the many LGBTI people who have been members of Pitt Street over more than three decades. This has included learning about the lived experience and particular journeys of LGBTI people. Pastoral care requires people to journey together in solidarity and support. This is substantially restrained if an entire class of persons (LGBTI people) are systematically excluded from participation in one of the significant liturgies of the Church.

We believe there is some urgency to the Uniting Church acting.

- Significant numbers of same-sex couples are ageing, and some would wish to spend their final years married, with the blessing of God and their faith community.
- Growing numbers of same-sex couples now have children. Again, it seems unjust to deny the couple (and children) marriage if that is what they seek.
- A further area of urgency relates to transgender couples who may or may not be legally married at the moment, and may even be required to divorce.
- The suicide rates for LGBTI people are significantly higher than the general population. Marriage equality would be one way to give positive support and affirmation for LGBTI people.

5. *What other issues are important to you in relation to these matters?*

While the Congregation accepts that it will take some time for the UCA to carefully address these matters, developments in the wider society are likely to take place in the next few years. The PSUC proposes that the Assembly of the UCA support the legal endorsement of marriage equality, even if that takes place prior to final doctrinal considerations by the UCA. There are some members of the UCA who support marriage equality but who do not, at this point in time, support a change to doctrine. The two matters can be separated, facilitating some positive changes at the 2015 Assembly.

A number of our partner churches overseas (notably the United Church of Canada and the United Church of Christ USA) now have substantial experience in working through legal and doctrinal changes with regard to marriage. If it has not taken place, then contact with the relevant national offices would be of benefit.

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6. *Are there particular questions or insights into these issues that you want to share from your ethno-cultural community?*

A number of people from different ethnic-cultural backgrounds have participated in our discussions. There are no specific issues to be raised at this time, though we recognise that the concerns of migrant-ethnic communities need to be carefully considered. One observation is that there is diversity within those communities and congregations.

As with previous Assembly discussions on leadership and sexuality, it will be helpful if there is clarity concerning what has been described above as a “conscience clause”.

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Uniting Church in Australia

Pitt Street Congregation

Attachment A : Conversation on Marriage Equality:

Summary of comments made at an open meeting of the Congregation

Sunday 31 August 2014

Welcome and Introduction

The Minister-in-Placement, the Revd Dr Margaret Mayman, welcomed people to the Conversation and thanked people for their interest. Margaret advised that Warren Talbot would give a brief sketch of Pitt Street Uniting Church's (PSUC) historical engagement with matters of pastoral care and justice for LGBTI people. Warren would also take notes for the meeting, prior to the drafting of a report for Church Council. Twenty-seven people attended the Conversation, held after the Sunday Gathering for community worship, 31 August 2014.

Historical Background

Warren reported that he had drafted a Background Paper that would be available after it had been cleared by various individuals referred to in the Paper. Warren said that in Pitt Street's long history of support for LGBTI people, two activities were most relevant for the Assembly discussion on marriage: the Covenant Service for two women conducted in 1990, and the decisions of a General Meeting of the Congregation in 2010. The former had resulted in considerable discussion in the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) and the current Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) policy (see National Working Group on Doctrine, 2009). The second activity had consolidated the views of the Congregation following 15 months of extensive consideration of a detailed Discussion Paper.

Current Assembly Discussion Paper

Margaret outlined the current Discussion Paper, noting that it was a commentary on the marriage service in *Uniting in Worship 2*. Theologically, the Discussion Paper uses the "basic doctrinal pattern of creation, fall and redemption" (see Paragraphs 7,8) to guide its approach.

The Conversation

The following points were made by 19 of the 27 people in attendance, plus comments provided by two people in an email after the meeting. For this document the comments are simply listed. They are not grouped in themes, and not listed in any order of priority. A separate document, approved by Church Council, organises and summarises these points and related materials as a response to the six questions provided in the Study Guide to the *Discussion Paper on Marriage*. The words used are, as close as possible, those of the participants, without editing. Terminology with regard to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people has not been standardised. Likewise, individuals used the words 'sex' and 'gender' in different ways throughout, and these

have not been changed. The Conversation commenced with more general comments about LGBTI people then focussed in on marriage.

Record of conversation

- There has been a lot of discussion in the Uniting Church about sexuality and gay people since the 1980s. It has always been supportive.
- There is a need to take a stance against bullying gay and lesbian students at school.
- The NSW Greens have a LGBTI policy committee which has looked at a number of these issues.
- I have learnt a lot more about the situation of intersex people.
- Laws about marriage, like other things, are not set in concrete.
- The Uniting Church needs a comprehensive understanding, to be included and not see anyone excluded from the mainstream such as marriage.
- It's all about happiness for all, not about being disruptive.
- The Synod and Assembly has always been respectful in its discussion of gay issues.
- The 1997 Assembly use of small groups worked very effectively in people being listened to.
- But when I was involved in Presbytery and Congregation discussions there was less respect, just debate.
- There is a need for respect and conversation at every stage.
- The marriage discussion should be about the quality of the relationship, not the gender or sex of the people involved.
- Lot's of same sex couples have children. It's time to accept it and "get over" any problems.
- There are severe limits in using the current marriage service as the framework for discussion.
- How do we address the tension between law and pastoral care in the church. WE can't legislate for pastoral care.
- "Love the sinner" and "hate the sin" does not work as a framework.
- The humanity of the Gospel suggests respect, care and nurture in all loving relations. To be our best selves.
- How would we respond as a Congregation if the UCA did not support same sex marriage?
- It looks like we will be way behind society on this matter.
- It's not a good time even talk about heterosexual marriage.
- The Discussion Paper seems to ignore many years of research into human sexuality and relationships.

- All our relationships are messy and gorgeous, and compliment who we are.
- How many gay people are there? A substantial minority which cannot be ignored.
- Most people in Australia are not having religious marriages at all. Interesting that gay and lesbian people are seeking that.
- There are problems in the current marriage service. For example, the prominence given to the prayer of confession is not appropriate.
- There needs to be flexibility re the use of the current marriage service.
- If Pitt street performed a same sex marriage then the Assembly would probably do very little. A Sacred Union was performed at the Brunswick Uniting Church in 2010.
- The current document is too legalistic about the definitions of marriage. Marriage is also a celebration of community.
- There is a difference in emphasis between the Consultation Paper and the Discussion Paper. The latter is more restrictive.
- The Uniting Church values the scholarly interpretation of the Scriptures.
- My attraction to the UCA was largely to do with love, acceptance and welcome for all.
- I don't want the Uniting Church to be left behind. It would if the government acted on same sex marriage before we did.
- My view is that should just do it! What are the sanctions if a minister performs a same sex marriage?
- There is a pastoral framework for LGBTI people and all our members.
- The challenge is to walk alongside, so that gay and straight people walk together. Pastoral sympathy is not needed.
- Or we can reclaim the pastoral concept in terms of walking together.
- Surprised how quickly and strongly attitudes in the wider society are changing.
- Do opponents see this issue as the last stand?
- The key place of justice and equality for all.
- Changing community attitudes indicate significant growing support, which is very strong amongst young women.
- Many same sex couples (25% in some studies) are already raising children. Studies show that the children are doing as well or better than other children. The church should speak for these couples and families.
- Society has not dealt with sexuality very well (forced wives, asianisation of the sex industry, power relations and domestic violence.)
- Support for UCA to re-consider the understanding of marriage.

- Doctrinal models other than creation, fall, redemption can be used such as biblical themes of exodus, liberation and exile and homecoming.
- The papers uses the male/female difference as fixed.
- There is no reflection of changing approaches to identity, such as intersex marriage.
- The voices of the most affected people have not been included.
- This is an urgent issue – for couples facing old age, or the legal status of transgender couples.
- Sad that the State might be moving ahead of the church.
- Pitt St can have its own voice in the community discussion.
- Some clergy are already blessing same sex relationships in a service.
- Assembly has not enforced the current 1991 policy.

Email comments received after the meeting

(1)

“...So i am wondering if there is an underlying belief or at least perception in the community, especially among older members of congregations, that somehow homosexuality is on the same spectrum as incest and indeed paedophilia. This way of thinking would mean that opening the door to gay marriage is like a foot in the door for incest and paedophilia to follow. In other words the resistance to gay marriage is born out of this fear.

I would really love for the Uniting Church to spell out loud and clear to the community at large that incest and paedophilia are aberrant and abhorrent human behaviours and that being gay (or LGBTI) is not a precursor to these aberrations.

To make a clear statement that gay marriage is a step towards recognising our common humanity and celebrating our unity in diversity.

To make a clear statement that the UC is against all forms of abuse of children and misuse of power, especially involving children and vulnerable groups.

I guess the whole issue of abuse of children by institutions such as the church means that the community is unreceptive to any messages that 'the church' may want to make.

In the end I would hope that... we could just get on with showing the community that we are serious about inclusiveness by enacting our beliefs in the practice of gay marriage as requested.”

(2)

The following comments are from Dr Michael Dudley, a Pitt Street member and medical practitioner (psychiatrist) with expertise in this area. Michael has agreed to be identified as he is offering views based on his professional expertise.

“My comments concern the latest documents – The Views of Marriage in the UCA report, and the Discussion Paper on Marriage, and mainly in relation to GLTBIQ people. Though I am aware of these debates within the UCA, I have not followed them in detail over the last 30 years. My interest now is as a UCA member who also has a sustained interest in mental health, suicide prevention and human rights, and the recognition of excluded groups¹. When one considers some of dire aspects of international politics for GLTBIQ people and the faultlines between states’ approaches over this issue, it would be hoped that Christian communities might be places of sanctuary rather than injury.

The reported experiences of GLTBIQ people in relation to Christian churches have often not been favourable. With notable exceptions, Christian churches and people too often have treated people’s sexuality as an exception to the Christian principle of universal invitation and welcome.

Current social pressures to legislate for same-sex marriage are seen by many within the churches as endangering the traditional definition of marriage. Australian churches, and the UCA in particular, will ultimately choose to accept or resist such pressures. As Kevin Rudd has commented (and the Views on Marriage in the UCA document notes), church and state may have different positions and practices on same-sex marriage: in his view the secular Australian state should be able to recognize same-sex marriage, and should legally exempt religious institutions from any requirement to change their historic position and practice that marriage is exclusively between a man and a woman.

As gatekeepers of marriage rites, Christian churches have routinely denied the fundamental recognition of non-heterosexual relationships which are life-long and covenantal. They have excluded same-sex attracted people from blessing, thereby adding to their burdens, rather than diminishing those burdens. It seems to me that the reasons for these practices can be found in faulty basic assumptions, ignorance and stigma. Many Christian churches have assumed that gender identity and sexual orientation are matters of choice; have maintained a substantially biological and functional (‘natural’) rather than relational view of marriage; and often have not been aware of or open to scientific research and scholarly discussions in this area. They have too often aligned themselves with unquestioned conservative views about sexuality, marriage and effective parenting.

Regardless of the outcome, however, it is important to discern that the pressure to widen the traditional position on marriage arises from concerns about justice denied to GLTBIQ people, and to recognize that churches have too often been prime sites for this.

Many churches have not yet faced the consequences of their exclusive practices. Arguably lack of contact with the stories of GLTBIQ people, and a failure of empathy and imagination and a consequent failure to support GLTBIQ people, have promoted community homophobia with its many terrible consequences – including violence, murder and suicide². Churches are not exempt.

¹ Dudley M, Silove D, Gale F (eds), *Mental Health and Human Rights: vision, praxis and courage*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012.

² Hatzenbuehler et al (2014) found that structural stigma as reflected by community markers of anti-gay prejudice, was associated with a shorter life expectancy of approximately 12 years (95% C.I.: 4e20 years) for sexual minorities living in high-prejudice communities; and that while suicide, homicide/violence, and cardiovascular diseases were all substantially elevated among sexual minorities in high-prejudice communities, there was an arresting 18-year difference in average age of suicide between sexual minorities in high-prejudice (age 37.5) and low-prejudice (age 55.7) communities. Hatzenbuehler ML, Bellatorre A, Lee Y,

This is a compelling reason why the UCA needs to take the debate about marriage equality seriously; it is connected to the need for forgiveness, reconciliation and to its quest for social justice.

I think that the present UCA marriage discussion document while offering valuable insights also perpetuates some errors. I agree with you that the marriage document's framework understanding of marriage is not broad enough (I completely agree about liberation or homecoming frameworks as worthy alternatives to the unitary one of creation, fall and redemption that is presented – and I am sure that we could identify other contenders). The 2013 consultation document while containing valuable material, and while having apparently consulted with Uniting Network (among other groups), does not communicate the experiences or transmit the voices of those who are most affected or who have most at stake. For there to be justice, there has to be equality of participation. Genuine engagement requires serious, sustained intent. Additionally, the document needs to demonstrate more theological reflection about what contemporary psychology, psychiatry and social science reveal about the needs and the perspectives of children and young people concerning the value of marital and defacto relationships.

If the UCA finds in favour of a traditional definition of marriage, as the consultation document suggests, I think that there will have to be a parallel legal recognition and church ceremony for same-sex couples that is equivalent to marriage in all but name. I understand that this is in direct opposition to current policy to avoid any ceremony that resembles the marriage service, but I think in the interests of non-discrimination in matters of such fundamental need, churches need to create approaches that fully honour marriage and its theology in the traditional sense while showing full respect to same-sex couples who also seek blessing for their relationships. Theological reflection may start from the experiences of heterosexual and non-heterosexual relationships that seek to embody fidelity and love in order to consider what each may learn from the other. I also wonder if it is possible to give churches/parishes independence on this issue. Could it be possible that they could decide what kind of service might be offered and how similar or different this could be for different churches - e.g there are often differences in city and rural areas.

As a child and adolescent psychiatrist, I often work with gay and lesbian young people, some of whom are suicidal about non-acceptance of their identity. For a number of these young people, their spirituality is paramount to them. I would like to see UCA demonstrate its relevance to them by taking their concerns seriously. “

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Marriage Equality and the Pitt Street Uniting Church: a Background Paper

by Warren Talbot³
Circulation draft for discussion and comment

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- Introduction and context
- Pitt Street support for LGBTI people
- Current Assembly discussion on marriage
- Future considerations
- Attachment: Pitt Street General Meeting decisions
- References

But in just a few words...

- ✚ The national Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) has commenced a discussion of the understanding of marriage in the Uniting Church. Doctrinal change is years away.
- ✚ Pitt Street has a long history of supporting equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people.
- ✚ Pitt Street should build on this history and continue to support marriage equality as a legal option for all Australians couples who decide to get married, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status.
- ✚ Pitt Street should also advocate for a change to the UCA doctrine on marriage to include same-gender⁴ couples, allowing for the exercise of conscience by clergy and congregations.

³ (c) Warren Talbot. *Personal views*. Warren Talbot is a member of the Church Council, Pitt Street Congregation of the Uniting Church in Australia, and a Co-Convenor, *Uniting Church LGBTI Network*, NSW/ACT Synod.

⁴ The Assembly papers use the term “same-gender” though some writers and LGBTI community members prefer the use of the phrase “same-sex”.

Introduction and context

1. The Pitt Street Congregation (“Pitt Street”) of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) has long held a national leadership position supporting LGBTI⁵ people in the UCA and the wider community.
2. In a wider church context, this is a reflection of a feisty tradition of independence, free thinking and tolerance associated with Congregationalism in Pitt Street and elsewhere (Emilson, *et.al.*, 2008; Keik, 1950; Walker, 1991). It is not surprising that former Congregational congregations have been at the forefront of supporting LGBTI equality in the UCA.⁶
3. More specifically, support for equality reflects the concerns of individuals and the particular involvement of LGBTI people in Pitt Street over many years. Pitt Street members, along with the three uniting churches, had supported the legalisation of male homosexual behaviour prior to union in 1977 (Hannah-Jones, 2003a; Talbot, 1984).
4. The ministry of the Revd Dr Dorothy McRae-McMahon, 1981-91, gave an explicit focus to the inclusion of LGBTI people. McRae-McMahon did not come out as a lesbian publicly until the Eighth (1997) national Assembly of the UCA, though her persistent support and advocacy for LGBTI people was evident years before (McMahon, 1984; McRae-McMahon, 2008).
5. At a pastoral level, Pitt Street has a number of LGBTI members, individuals and couples, and they are accepted and affirmed throughout the Congregation, including in leadership roles.
6. In response to proposals at the 2012 (Thirteenth) meeting of the UCA national Assembly, the Assembly’s Working Group on Doctrine (WGD) has issued a “Discussion Paper on Marriage”, seeking responses through the UCA (UCA WGD 2013). It is likely to be at least another decade before the Assembly decides to support marriage equality. The Australian Parliament is highly likely to legislate in favour of marriage equality before the UCA does so. That will raise issues for clergy as legally authorised marriage celebrants.

⁵ I am using the term “LGBTI” (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) throughout as this has become the most common, though not universal, acronym applied to the communities of mutual interest based around sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status. The term is now embodied in Commonwealth of Australia legislation. Where I am referring to, or quoting specific documents, I will use the terms as used then such as “gay and lesbian” or “homosexual”.

⁶ Beyond Pitt Street, these include: Canberra City Congregation (formerly the National Memorial Congregational Church); Chester St, Epping, NSW; Pilgrim Church, Adelaide; Pilgrim Church, Launceston; Tasmania; and Brougham Place, North Adelaide. I am sure there are others. I am equally sure there are former Presbyterian and Methodist congregations which adopted a diverse and inclusive approach.

Pitt Street support for LGBTI people

7. Thirty years ago, Pitt Street made a written submission supporting equality for gay and lesbian people to the Dicker Committee on Homosexuality and the Church. Pitt Street members Meredith Knight and the late Don Dudgeon were members of the Dicker Committee (Dicker, 1985; Talbot, 1995).
8. Cross Section, a support group for “homosexual and heterosexual” Christians, was established at Pitt Street in 1982⁷, and usually held monthly meetings for pastoral support, worship and education until 1994 (Cross Section, *no date*). It was replaced by Uniting Network NSW/ACT in 1994, following the first Daring national conference held in Adelaide in June 1994. The Uniting Network NSW/ACT assumed a more active role in education, advocacy and awareness in the wider church around the concerns of LGBTI people (UCA NSW/ACT, Synod Reports).
9. Following unsuccessful moves commenced at the Fourth Assembly (1985) to enshrine “celibacy in singleness and fidelity in [heterosexual] marriage” as a national policy for the UCA⁸, the Sixth (1991) Assembly of the Uniting Church agreed to establish a second Task Group on Sexuality (the Assembly Sexuality Task Group, [ASTG]) with a six year brief to examine changing approaches to human sexuality (UCA ASTG, 2007; UCA NWGS 2009). Pitt Street made a written submission to the ASTG supporting gay and lesbian people (Pitt Street, 1994/5).
10. A Pitt Street member, the Revd Dr Robert Stringer was the first Secretary and a member of the ASTG (in his capacity as National Director, Social Responsibility and Justice). Another Pitt Street member, Ineke, was a corresponding member of the ASTG and employed by the Assembly to assist with Task Group consultations in NSW. The writer was the sole gay or lesbian member of the fourteen person Task Group, and an Elder at the Canberra City Congregation at the time.
11. The Task Group’s Final Report favoured an ethical framework of “right relations” to consider the quality of all relationships, heterosexual and homosexual. A Task Group recommendation that the Assembly commence work on a liturgy to recognise same gender relationships was withdrawn on the floor of the Assembly with substantial pressure from indigenous, migrant-ethnic and conservative evangelical members of the Assembly (Hannah-Jones, 2003a, 2003b; UCA NWGD, 2009).
12. In 1990 Pitt Street celebrated a service of blessing for two women, Alison and Ineke.⁹ Although publicity was not planned for the event, a process of complaint took place which resulted in a major consideration of the issues by the Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) (UCA NWGD, 2009; Talbot, 2010). Following the receipt of a number of discussion papers, and a review of the ceremony conducted by the then Minister-in-Placement, the Revd Dr Dorothy McRae-McMahon,

⁷ There are no written records. This is a judgement based on conversations with individuals involved.

⁸ The proposal was from the then Bourke Presbytery, Synod of Victoria. The Assembly was focussed on three major national issues (becoming a multicultural church, setting up the UAICC, debating participation in the Australian bicentennial) and the sexuality proposal from Bourke was never discussed.

⁹ The first names are used with permission.

the ASC reprimanded the Congregation for some “inappropriate” aspects of the Service, and issued a policy instructing clergy to not perform services for same sex couples which “resemble” the marriage service (UCA, NWGD, 2009).

13. That Assembly policy remains in place. Some clergy are not aware of it, and a number ignore it on the grounds of pastoral care and justice. As far as the writer is aware, the Assembly has never made any effort to specifically advise clergy as to what might or might not “resemble” the marriage service, let alone attempt to enforce the policy (Talbot, 2009).
14. The immediate past Minister-in-Placement of the Pitt Street Congregation, the Revd Ian Pearson (2003-13), was an early, careful and bridge-building advocate of marriage -- and more general LGBTI -- equality in the church and wider society. In 2005 Pearson attended and spoke at the founding meeting of Australians for Marriage Equality, apologising for Christian homophobia (Evans, 2005). With Elizabeth Teece, a then Co-Convenor of Uniting Network NSW/ACT and Pitt Street member, Pearson jointly signed a submission to the then Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) inquiry into same sex relationships and their legal status in Australia (Teece and Pearson, 2008).
15. In addition Pearson made a written submission to the Australian Parliament when the Marriage Equality Bill was being debated (Pearson, 2009). Beyond these national public policy engagements, and practical pastoral care for LGBTI people in the Pitt Street Congregation, Pearson presented significant reform proposals for LGBTI equality to meetings of the Synod of NSW/ACT (in 2005) and the Eleventh national Assembly of the UCA in 2006 (Pearson, 2006).
16. Pearson’s theological critique of homophobia as a “sin” was well-covered in the Australian LGBTI community media (Kong, 2011; SSO, 2011), and extended to the Asia Pacific region, such as by a Christian pastor in the *Fiji Times* in 2012 (Bagwhan, 2012).
17. In November 2008 the Pitt Street Worship Committee requested Warren Talbot to prepare a discussion paper on marriage, including options for same-sex couples (Talbot, 2009). Following consideration and revision by the Worship committee, Elders committee and Church Council during 2009, the paper was distributed to the Congregation for general discussion with a General Meeting of the Congregation being held in March 2010. At that meeting a number of proposals were agreed to by consensus (Attachment A), including support for marriage equality as a doctrine in the “longer term”.

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Current Assembly discussion on marriage

18. In 2012, the Thirteenth Assembly of the UCA considered proposals by two presbyteries in Victoria to reconsider the church's doctrine of marriage being restricted to heterosexual couples. The Assembly requested the Working Group on Doctrine (WGD) to consult widely and prepare a discussion paper on the matter. The Working Group has produced a report of consultations held and a discussion paper based on the current Marriage Service. (UCA WGD 2013). It is likely that a progress report will be presented to the 2015 Assembly, and further work commissioned.
19. Based on the current heterosexual marriage service, the Discussion Paper fails to adequately consider alternative approaches, which might be framed in terms of marriage equality. The paper displays no awareness of the past 40 years of research in the social sciences and humanities about understandings of sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status. Christian feminist critiques of heterosexual marriage are ignored. Transgender and intersex voices are not heard. In summary, the paper fails to adequately respond to the task given to the WGD by the Assembly.
20. The following Assembly actions relating to equality for same gender couples are worth noting and commending. First, following considerable lobbying by Uniting Network Australia and individual UNA members, the Assembly Beneficiary (superannuation) Fund extended full equal benefits to the partners of clergy in same sex relationships. This is an official recognition by the national Assembly that there are clergy living in committed long term relationships, deserving of equal treatment. Second, when the Australian Parliament debated a marriage equality bill, the Uniting Church and the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) were the only members of the National Council of Churches in Australia which did not sign a national advertisement opposing marriage equality organised by the Australian Christian Lobby (ACL, 2011) Thirdly, Uniting Justice made a submission to the Parliament supporting marriage equality, though this was not on behalf of the Assembly as a whole. (UJA, 2011).

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Future considerations

21. There is no indication that the Assembly will adopt a leadership position on the issue of marriage equality, and national church decisions are likely to follow civil society. Writing in his book on religion in Australian society, the journalist David Marr said that the Uniting Church was like a caterpillar having the potential to burst forth and fly with color, but never quite making it (Marr, 1994). The UCA leadership is risk averse on sexuality issues, though when required to take a stance it has always supported LGBTI people, and resisted anti-LGBTI measures within the UCA. The seemingly modest but signature and important achievement of the UCA leadership (1982 onwards) has been to avoid the adoption of the slogan “celibacy in singleness and fidelity in [heterosexual] marriage” as binding national UCA policy. This slogan currently hinders progress and equality for LGBTI people in some of our Australian and overseas partner churches (such as the Anglican Church in Australia; the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand; and the United Methodist Church USA). Equally, many of our other English-speaking partner churches have moved beyond the slogan to policies and practices of diversity and inclusion.

22. It is not helpful for progressive members of the UCA to just wish we were more like the United Church of Canada or the United Church of Christ in the USA -- though, we may be inspired by their words and deeds. It is helpful to work steadily and constructively within the processes of the UCA as they exist. In general terms, that is the responsibility of all social change movements. In Australia, the national organisation *Australian Marriage Equality* is a good example of this respectful approach to social change in the Australian political, religious and cultural context (AME, 2014).

23. A number of UCA clergy already conduct blessing ceremonies (a marriage by any other name) for same gender couples, and will continue to do so. Several clergy did so for four couples at the Brunswick Uniting Church (Melbourne) in June 2010, naming it as a service of Sacred Union (Jenski, *et al*, 2010). That was held in conjunction with a Uniting Network national conference and extensively publicised. The matter was referred to the then national President, the Revd Alistair McRae (a supporter of marriage equality) who declined to take any disciplinary action against the clergy or congregation. As with the ordination of gay and lesbian people, there is unlikely to be a single national policy or doctrinal “announcement”, but a gradual implementation of marriage equality in the lived faith and witness, the shared ministry and mission, of local congregations. For the founding church of congregationalism in Australia, (Pitt Street!) that is how it should be.

24. In conclusion, it is important that Pitt Street and other congregations take an in-principled theological and ethical position supporting marriage equality, communicating that clearly to the wider church, LGBTI communities and the wider Australian society.

Attachment A: Decisions of a General Meeting of the Pitt Street Congregation



Uniting Church in Australia : Pitt Street Congregation

Resolutions of the Congregation Meeting Sunday 21 March 2010

LITURGICAL RECOGNITION OF GAY AND LESBIAN COUPLES

Sacramental participation

1. The Pitt Street Congregation re-affirms its support for the dignity and equality of all of God's children, regardless of human differences. The Congregation affirms, with the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) Assembly Standing Committee (ASC) that "all baptised persons" are welcome at the Lord's Table, "regardless of sexual orientation". (*Rf: ASC, in Dicker, G (Ed.), Homosexuality: Responses, Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 1985, page 23.*)

Prayers and blessings

2. The Congregation affirms that it supports the liturgical use of prayers and blessings for people in all life circumstances, including for gay and lesbian couples; and supports the Minister(s)-in-placement if they decide to use such prayers and blessings.
3. The Congregation recognises that decisions are made in individual pastoral circumstances, with due regard for the Basis of Union, Constitution, Regulations and doctrine of the UCA.

Marriage

4. The Congregation notes that any such Service of prayers and blessings shall not resemble the Marriage Service.
5. In the longer term the Congregation supports a re-consideration of the Uniting Church's doctrine of marriage with a view to the Marriage Service being open to all long-term mutually faithful committed couples.

Advice and thanks

6. The Congregation advise the Presbytery of Sydney, Synod of NSW and the ACT, UCA Assembly and Uniting Network Australia of these decisions.
7. The meeting thanks the Worship Committee for its initiative and leadership in this matter.

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